

Federal agencies consider sage grouse in firefighting strategies

By SCOTT SONNER and MEAD GRUVER
Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — Federal agencies deciding how to deploy firefighters during one of the West's worst wildfire seasons are considering a new factor in their deliberations: an imperiled bird that inhabits a vast stretch of sagebrush from California to the Dakotas.

Officials have already mapped out the greater sage grouse's habitat west of the Rockies, where wildfire is considered a primary threat to the bird. They've positioned semi-trailer sized water containers in areas that need protecting. And wildlife biologists are advising firefighters.

The shift in strategy came even as Interior Secretary Sally Jewell telegraphed that the bird was unlikely to be listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made that official in an announcement Sept. 22.

The new strategy paid off in August. Firefighters were able to quickly protect all but about 1,000 acres of priority habitat during a 10,000-acre fire 120 miles northwest of Reno, Nevada, said Walter Herzog, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's fire management officer for Northern California.

There's now an "acknowledgment that we are all sort of in this together," said Nancy Haug, a BLM district manager in Nevada. "The fire team comes in now, understands the issue and is as interested as we are in trying to do the right thing in sage grouse habitat."

The Interior Department, which includes Fish and Wildlife, has been keen to highlight government work to avoid listing the ground-dwelling bird because the stakes are high.

Biologists consider sage grouse the ecosystem's "indicator species"



Adam Eschbach/The Idaho Press-Tribune via AP

A plane helps put out a wildfire near the Reynolds Creek area in the Owyhee Mountains, Idaho, on Aug. 14. It scorched grassland ranchers need to feed cattle and primary habitat for sage grouse.

— or barometer of the health of its habitat — as the northern spotted owl is in Northwest old-growth forests.

Much like how federal protection for the spotted owl 25 years ago has impeded logging, federal protection for sage grouse could restrict energy development and grazing across the Intermountain West.

"Some people wish it wasn't, but it's a huge deal," said Ron Dunton, assistant director of fire and aviation for the BLM. "If it's listed, I tell people it will be the spotted owl times 50."

Nobody pretends this year's initial efforts to protect sage grouse habitat from fire in Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Utah and California will make or break the bird. But officials hope an overdue investment in preventing and fighting fires will save money — and an imperiled ecosystem.

Wildfire is considered less of a threat than energy development in the bird's eastern range — Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and portions

of the Dakotas — but eventually the government will apply the wildfire strategy there, too.

Across the Great Basin, a fire-prone, invasive weed called cheatgrass has intermingled with sagebrush. Federal land managers hope to break a "fire-cheatgrass cycle" in which cheatgrass fuels unnaturally intense fires that kill sagebrush, enabling still more cheatgrass to invade.

Fighting invasive species with well-managed cattle grazing and seeding with native plants is a big part of the new approach that eventually will encompass the entire sagebrush steppe ecosystem covering an area of the West almost as big as Texas.

"There's a lot of native vegetation that could grow in if given a chance," said Mike Archer, a wildfire consultant and blogger in Glendora, Calif. "The problem is the cheatgrass is so hardy a breed that it just pushes everything else out."

Not all sagebrush habitat is equal, however.

Some has little cheatgrass and is

in good shape to rebound from fire. Other areas would require a major effort to restore after a wildfire. The Interior Department has classified sagebrush across the Great Basin to help firefighters decide which areas make the most sense to save.

"The first rule of thumb: Protect what is left. That is what we are trying to do — through strategy and planning — prevent further habitat loss," Deputy Assistant U.S. Interior Secretary James Lyons said.

Lyons said he took notice when Fish and Wildlife Service Director Daniel Ashe candidly shared his biggest concern about the bird's future. "He said that unless we can get a handle on fire, we may not be able to reach a point where we can be confident we can conserve the species," Lyons recalled.

Firefighting now eats up more than half of the U.S. Forest Service budget. The BLM completed a "budget scrub" to reallocate resources for the sagebrush effort west of the Rockies.

John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert, said firefighters could question the government's priorities under the new policy. "If there's a habitat issue versus property, how do they reconcile that? How do they allocate resources when, as we've seen in the last few weeks, those resources are limited?" Freemuth said.

Dunton, the BLM's assistant fire and aviation director, insisted field supervisors will decide where to deploy.

"I've been a line officer and a field officer, and those would not be easy decisions to make. But they cannot be made from Boise, Idaho," Dunton said, referring to the National Interagency Fire Center government firefighting headquarters.

"It's a bit of a cultural change," he added. "But it's just something that's necessary."

Ranch uses wastewater to survive the drought

By JEFF DELONG
Reno Gazette-Journal

RENO, Nev. (AP) — At Douglas County's Bently Ranch, these days the backup is squarely up front.

Reclaimed wastewater is used to water crops late every irrigation season, but this year, during a protracted drought, it's largely what's keeping the place in the business of agriculture.

"If we were just on surface water, we would have stopped irrigating a month ago. We'd be dry," said Matt McKinney, ranch manager. "Now we can go all summer long. It's a lifesaver."

It was a decade ago that the ranch's founder, inventor and philanthropist Donald Bently, first signed a contract with the sewer districts serving Minden-Gardnerville and Lake Tahoe's Zephyr Cove area to receive effluent water for irrigation use.

All winter long, treated wastewater is pumped from the two sewer districts to a reservoir built on ranch property. Come summer, the water is used to irrigate Bently Ranch's primary crop, high-quality alfalfa hay, which is in turn sold as cattle feed to dairy farms in California.

Bently Ranch also receives "biosolids" from the wastewater plants — a combination of fecal matter and household garbage put down sink disposals — which is combined with wood chips and green yard waste to ultimately produce fertilizer in the only such major composting operation now existing in Northern Nevada.

It's agriculture with a full-circle, sustainable philosophy that is now paying off big-time.



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MARKET SALE SET, DONATIONS TAKEN AFTER WILDFIRES HALT COUNTY FAIR

REPUBLIC, Wash. — In her two decades as a 4-H leader in Ferry County, Karl Neal has never seen a fire season like this. Even in 1988, with the White Mountain fire raging on nearby Sherman Pass, the Ferry County Fair went on as usual.

"The kids had sooty ash falling on their animals, which were all clean for fitting and showing," she remembered. "We just went with it."

This year is different. Faced with the threat of the North Star Fire, which burned more than 200,000 acres and threatened many homes, Ferry County commissioners on Aug. 25 canceled the 72nd annual fair. Trevor Lane, director of Washington State University Extension for Ferry County said holding a fair just wasn't safe.

"It doesn't make sense to bring people into a county where we're telling people to leave," he said. "We are completely surrounded by fires."

Twenty miles to the east, the Kettle and Colville complexes charred 73,000 acres. To the west, the Okanogan and Tunk Block complexes burned more than a quarter-million acres in the largest wildfire in state history. Statewide, dozens of blazes consumed more than a thousand square miles of timberland, grassland, pasture and residential areas.

The Ferry County fairgrounds served as temporary shelter for displaced livestock before high winds forced a total evacuation.

The loss of a fair could deliver a big impact on 4-H youth. Children and teens have spent the past year raising animals for market. Fair judging and sales are a culmination and a reward for youths raising cattle, pigs, sheep and goats, with greater effort meriting larger rewards.



Linda McLean, director of Colville Reservation Extension 4-H programs, and Marilyn Signor, office assistant, wear masks to protect themselves from smoky air in Nespelem. (Photo courtesy of Colville Reservation Extension)



A Colville Reservation 4-H club member handles his market pig during last year's Ferry County Fair. (Photo by Linda McLean, WSU Extension)

"There's a lot of money invested in these animals," said Ann Fagerlie, WSU Extension director for neighboring Okanogan County.

"Kids who do a better job have animals that gain weight and flourish better than those who don't," Neal said. Those animals advance in judging and get a prime place at the weekend stock sale.

"The lesson is you get out of a project what you put into it.

"Kids could take a financial loss if the animals are sold for just the meat-packing price and don't have the support of individuals and businesses that normally come out to support them and the ribbons they've earned by buying the animals for meat".

To counteract that loss, Ferry County Extension officials organized a 4-H Market Sale for Ferry County and Colville Reservation 4-H members on Sept. 5, at the Northeast Washington Fair Grounds in Colville. It took place the same day that 4-H youth would have held their fair sale.

"We're doing it because time is of the essence," Lane said at the time. "These kids may not have the resources to continue to support these animals." The sale is also a morale booster, providing "a sense of normalcy," in a very stressful season, he said.

The Washington State 4-H Foundation is taking donations to support 4-H clubs and families affected by wildfires. Contributions pay for members' loss of club supplies, project materials or livestock projects. An application is being designed and will be available online soon for the families and clubs to submit a request for contributed funds.

Learn more at <http://www.4h.wsu.edu/foundation>.

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